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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL VE

SUBJECT: CATHOLIC CHURCH PREPARING TO OPPOSE CONSTITUTIONAL  
CHANGES

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,  
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Papal Nuncio Giacinto Berloco told the Ambassador September 6 that the Catholic Church is concerned with the "radical direction" of Chavez' proposed constitutional changes. Berloco said he expected the bishops would be critical in their evaluation of the proposals in an October communique -- which will be similar to their July 7 pastoral letter that questioned the need for constitutional changes. Berloco said Venezuelan voters would turn down some of Chavez' proposed changes if they were allowed to vote line-by-line, but expected voters to approve the changes if the BRV succeeds in bundling them in one bloc for the public referendum in December.

¶2. (C) Sucre Archbishop Diego Padron told polooff September 6 that the Venezuelan bishops will conduct a thorough review of Chavez' constitutional changes with the help of legal experts before issuing their October communique. He said the bishops decided not to issue a lengthy critical communique after their September 5 meeting in Caracas to keep the door open for some dialogue with National Assembly members. The Church leadership remains pessimistic that the BRV will engage in real dialogue, however. Padron also said the Church wants to make its voice heard later, when greater public attention will be focused on Chavez' constitutional package.

¶3. (SBU) The Venezuelan Conference of Bishops' September 6 statement contained thinly veiled criticism of the BRV's handling of the constitutional change process so far. The bishops noted that Venezuela's constitution should be a "peace treaty for the country, and not a declaration of war." They also stressed that "The constitution does not belong to one particular group, but all citizens, and therefore should be the product of national consensus." Caracas Cardinal Jorge Urosa will lead the bishops' review, along with three other bishops, including Archbishop Padron.

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